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ABSTRACT

This guidebook uses a question and answer format to recommend ways by which principals can manage 48 "conflict points" that often occur in a school setting. A preface describes conflicts as being natural and pervasive in the secondary school context. Although the principal is regarded as the responsible agent to reduce dissonance, the challenge for principals becomes one of managing differences effectively. Principals should begin by viewing every conflict as an opportunity to improve a relationship or to enhance a service, for conflict is a precursor of productive change. (CJH)

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Conflict!

A CONVERSATION ABOUT MANAGING DIFFERENCES

By Robert Maidment

National Association of Secondary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

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Other NASSP publications
by Robert Maidment are:

- *Straight Talk — A Communication Primer*
- *Meetings — Accomplishing More with Better and Fewer*
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DEDICATION

To those who equate conflict with an opportunity for productive change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Maidment is a professor of educational administration at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. His work experience includes a decade of elementary and secondary principalships in Virginia and Illinois. Maidment is co-editor of *Criticism, Conflict, & Change;* co-author of *Simulation Games — Design and Implementation,* and author of *Robert's Rules of Disorder — A Guide to Mismanagement, Straight Talk — A Guide to Saying More with Less, Tuning In — A Guide to Effective Listening,* and *Writing It Right — A Guide to Better Messages.*

PREFACE

Conflict. The word itself can be disquieting. Conflict is a natural and pervasive but often misunderstood force that thrives in all work settings. Within that diverse and complex setting is the secondary school, where conflicts can expand exponentially. And, of course, it is the building principal who is the responsible agent to reduce dissonance.

Since conflicts are natural and pervasive, attempts to eliminate them are counterproductive. The challenge for principals becomes one of managing differences effectively. The first step is to perceive conflict as a positive force. Every conflict — including all interpersonal misunderstandings over facts, methods, goals, or values — can be viewed as an *opportunity* to improve a relationship or to enhance a service. Conflict, therefore, is a precursor of productive change.

A question and answer format was used to define and describe the nature of conflict in a school setting. Although no specific behaviors guarantee success in managing differences, the suggested viewpoints and practices are more likely than not to yield success.

Conflict Point No. 1
Think Positively

Q: Don't most people view conflict *negatively?*

A: Probably. Ask a group to free associate on the word conflict. Likely responses will include several "negative" words — fight, battle, war, argument; some "neutral" words — tension, problem, people, discussion; and, possibly, a few "positive" words — fun, excitement, challenge, opportunity. Only by accentuating the *positive* descriptors can we view conflict in a different, more promising light and seek workable ways to manage it.

Conflict Point No. 2
Sense the Opportunity

Q: What? You're suggesting that conflict can be considered as an *opportunity?*

A: Certainly. Differences can be viewed as opportunities to improve relationships, programs, or services. The Chinese symbol for crisis translates as "an opportunity blowing on a dangerous wind." Think in terms of a "creative conversion" — from conflict to dissonance reduction to problem solving to improved service or communication, and ultimately, to acceptance and support. How we manage these differences, therefore, profoundly influences the quality of life in schools.

Conflict Point No. 3

Enjoy It

Q: While I accept the notion of conflict-as-opportunity, aren't you stretching it by suggesting that managing conflict can be *fun* and *exciting?*

A: Why not? No productive change occurs within schools without some resistance. It goes with the territory. Effective principals have learned to confront differences in a constructive manner and to derive personal satisfaction from their efforts. We're not advocating, however, enjoyment to the extent that one deliberately generates conflict in order to resolve it!

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How Principals Can Manage Differences

By Robert J. Marzano

Conflict Point No. 4

Encourage Legitimate Resistance

Q: How can one view internal resistance as being *positive?*

A: While every staff member has the right to resist, many administrators might prefer that this right be judiciously, if not infrequently, exercised. Professionals in school settings also have a *responsibility* to resist especially when the "what's-best-for-students" rule is ignored. When principals fully embrace the notion that teachers have both the right *and* the responsibility for legitimate resistance, it again places conflict in a proper — and positive — perspective. Resistance generates new opportunities for enhanced interpersonal relationships and improved educational programming.

Conflict Point No. 5
Focus upon Similarities

Q: How can we further reduce negative perceptions of conflict?

A: Conflict situations cause us to focus upon differences — dissonance in relationships and disparity in resources. Often overlooked are the similarities — prior agreements, arrangements, and accomplishments — resulting from earlier interactions. By focusing upon both previous and present similarities our current differences are perceived as less troublesome. Such positive focusing, while not diminishing the importance of an impasse, can facilitate the forging of a workable compromise.

Conflict Point No. 6
Acknowledge It

Q: Can a school setting ever be conflict free?

A: Any administrator who denies the presence of conflict within a school delivers one of three messages:

- "I'm unaware that conflict exists"
- "I suppose any evidence of internal conflict"
- "I am deliberately misleading you."

Conflict, as an ever-present energizing force, is an essential ingredient of growth. It is the failure to manage conflict effectively that produces organizational dysfunction.

Conflict Point No. 7
Review Assumptions

Q: Can we make some basic assumptions about conflict?

A: Here is a "starter" list of assumptions:

- Conflict is neither inherently good or bad, nor is it generally right or wrong.
- The absence of conflict is not an indicator of an effective organization.
- Although there are no prescribed ways of resolving conflict, some strategies tend to work better than others.
- Workable compromises usually replace notions of "victories" or "defeats."
- The degree to which conflicts emerge naturally and are resolved amicably is one hallmark of an effective organization.

Conflict Point No. 8
Compete and Lose

Q: Do people naturally compete before expressing a willingness to cooperate?

A: In an oft-used group exercise in conflict management participants in pairs are provided with a matrix of 36 squares — 6 rows of 6 squares — and are asked, by taking turns, to produce as many straight rows containing 5 Xs and Os as possible. As expected, most players sense the similarity with a childhood game, compete, and predictably "lose." Rarely does a team reach the most desirable solution by placing one X and one O in *every* square.

Conflict Point No. 9
Collaborate and Win

Q: Was that last example fair? A game situation was established, thus inviting competition and creating a win-lose situation.

A: Unfortunately, game-playing behaviors also permeate most of our interpersonal relationships. A failure to redirect this energy into productive action can increase dissention. Just as we've learned the "rules" governing competitive activities, so can we learn to compromise, to conciliate, to collaborate, and most important, to care. Some of us, however, need more "unlearning" than others.

Conflict Point No. 10
Determine the Cause

Q: What causes conflict?

A: Conflict usually results from one of three causes:

- Limited resources — "What you have is what I need"
- Incompatible goals — "What you want is not what I want"
- Differing perceptions — "What you see is not what I see."

These "causes" overlap in the manner of seasonal sports. Recall that rainy afternoon when the JV basketball, wrestling, and baseball coaches were vying for "turf rights" to the auxiliary gym, and the archery club sponsor was already there practicing. Now, *that's* conflict!

Conflict Point No. 11

Count Your Resources

Q: Are there different approaches to resolving conflict over resources?

A: Here are five distinct approaches to the allocation of resources:

- Accommodation — "We have the resources and we agree on their use."
- Negotiation — "We have the resources,
- Competition — "We have the resources, but we're not willing to share them."
- Dissension — "We have the resources, but we disagree on their use."
- Compromise — "For a given time we're willing to share whatever resources we have and to agree on their use."

Knowing the limits of one's resources, therefore, helps to predict future behaviors.

Conflict Point No. 12
Identify the Types

Q: What are the different types of conflict?

A: Interpersonal conflicts are characterized by differences over:

- Facts — "Enrollments in foreign language electives have (have not) increased"
- Methods — "The aural-oral approach to language instruction is (is not) preferable"
- Goals — "Secondary school graduates should (should not) be reasonably proficient in a second language"
- Values — "Students should (should not) be encouraged to pursue Spanish rather than French."

Obviously, these types are impure. No conflict, for example, is value free. The more value-laden the conflict, however, the more difficult an acceptable resolution generally becomes.

Conflict No. 13
Look Around

Q: Where do we find these various conflict types?

A: One can force-fit the four "types" of conflict — facts, methods, goals, and values — against the various interactions within a school setting:

- an individual v. himself/herself
- one individual v. another
- one "deviant" v. the group
- subgroups v. the total group
- one group v. the total organization
- organization A v. organization B.

These seven interactions, alone, when multiplied by the four "types," yield 28 conflict "opportunities." You've probably recognized most of them by mid-day each Monday!

Conflict Point No. 14
Take a Closer Look

Q: Can leaders actually *cause* conflict?

A: Certain conditions in any human enterprise can set a tone for controversy, and from a managerial perspective a leader can easily be the causal agent. Conflict-inducing conditions actually caused by principals include ill-defined expectations, arbitrary standards, subjective appraisals, lack of candor, absence of trust, and that familiar but chronic lament of teachers — an unnecessary clerical overburden. When one or more of these and other similar conditions exist, interpersonal conflicts predictably increase.

Conflict Point No. 15
Examine Your Style

Q: Does one's management style influence the way conflicts are handled?

A: One's style of managing with others is heavily influenced by basic personality patterns. A generally passive leader might avoid conflict situations and rely heavily upon others having the appropriate resolution skills. An assertive leader might initiate conflict-reducing strategies and actively seek face-to-face encounters. The aggressive leader, while also taking direct and forceful action, might create additional conflict through lack of patience with or sensitivity toward others. Finally, the passive-aggressive type could lull you into tentative agreements then deliberately avoid resolution by raising a raft of objections.

Conflict Point No. 16

Select an Appropriate Tactic

Q: How then do we resolve conflict productively?

A: Initially, let's review the array of ways we *attempt* to resolve conflict. We avoid or attack. We delay, deny, or delegate. We negotiate, mediate, and arbitrate. We consent and compromise. We resolve and reconcile. Interestingly, each of these tactics works sometimes and produces solutions of varying permanence. We enhance the chance for successful resolution, however, by knowing *what* to do *when*.

Conflict Point No. 17
Ignore with Care

Q: You've cited ways we attempt to resolve conflict. Can conflict ever be ignored?

A: One can "ignore" in different ways. A person can be truly unaware or pretend to be. While true unawareness can sometimes be embarrassing, no leader is totally omniscient. And once informed, appropriate action is taken. Deliberate or "false" unawareness, however, is deceptive since one is denying the existence of conflict.

If an "I don't know" is really an "I don't care," we're dealing with apathy. Now, if a leader is both knowledgeable and caring but then elects to ignore, it becomes a calculated risk: "If it doesn't take care of itself, I'll deal with it later."

Conflict Point No. 18
Respect the Process

Q: Aren't most of our conversations really dead-end discussions that achieve little or nothing?

A: One result of human encounters is a perceived level of satisfaction as we agree, disagree, or agree to disagree. While the content of our discussions varies, the process of interacting — meeting, discussing, parting — is consistently similar and familiar. We often overlook, therefore, a very basic notion of interpersonal communication: Each encounter actually sets the stage for the next one. Perhaps this gives credence to the oft-cited, cryptic phrase, "The process *is* the content."

Conflict Point No. 19
Express Your Feelings

Q: Do my feelings about a person or situation influence a discussion?

A: High among the powerful influencers in beginning a discussion are the lingering feelings, positive or negative, that carry over from previous interactions. In picking up on a prior conversation it is often helpful to acknowledge one's feelings: "I'm delighted with the progress we've made"; "I'm concerned that we're drifting from the real issue"; "I'm really anxious to reach closure." Such up-front "ownership" of feelings is an invitation to straight talk and always preferable to faking it.

Conflict Point No. 20

Allow Hidden Agendas To Surface

Q: What happens when we don't "level" with others?

A: Often the topic we discuss, the "surface" agenda, masks the real issue, the "hidden" agenda. We're negotiating a proposed annual supply budget with the science department chairman and focus upon the consumable materials item. That's the surface agenda. But we're really concerned about possible excessive waste and breakage within the department. That's our hidden agenda. Do we risk alienating the chairman? By revealing our true concerns, real or imagined, we enhance the quality of this interaction and, quite likely, countless ones to follow. That, along with fewer broken beakers.

Conflict Point No. 21
Check It Out

Q: How can we be certain that the facts we've gathered are accurate?

A: While it is difficult to have all the facts we need in selecting an appropriate course of action, it is essential that the facts we do have are correct. Our most valuable and marketable skill, objectivity, is tainted whenever our working data are unreliable. Adding inaccurate information to the heightened emotional level normally accompanying an intense issue courts disaster. If an initial step in conflict resolution is to gather the facts, then the next crucial one is to check the facts we've gathered for accuracy. And, if the facts don't check out, don't use them.

Conflict Point No. 22
Soften the Tone

Q: How can I keep my cool when someone else is losing theirs?

A: An argument is a discussion run amok. Once a disputant loses objectivity, peaceful and lasting settlements are less likely. A venerable saw suggests the one who talks most and talks loudest is the one who's wrong. Avoid the contagion of high-rise emotional temperatures by consciously softening the tone and slowing the pace. Such behaviors keep emotions in check and ideas in control.

Conflict Point No. 23

Think as a Noun, Act as an Adjective

Q: Must the relationship between a principal and staff always be adversarial?

A: In the time-honored distinction between labor and management, yes. But "adversarial" doesn't necessarily imply "controversial." Principals enjoy a two-fold relationship with teachers and other staff members:

- A "corporate" line relationship exists as the principal executes board policy and central office directives
- A "collegial" staff relationship exists as the principal interacts collaboratively with school personnel.

The word "principal" derived from an adjective as in "principal teacher," the title originally given to building administrators. In this sense the principal-teacher relationship is more "adjectival" than adversarial.

Conflict Point No. 24
Test for Stress

Q: Doesn't conflict produce stress?

A: Yes, but some stress is necessary for preparing us for any interpersonal situation perceived as adversarial. When our "primitive" brain is activated, digestion slows, pupils dilate, breathing and heart rate increase, muscles tense, blood pressure rises, and finally, the levels of cholesterol and glucose rise while interferon falls. Although nature readies us for the encounter, we can have too much of a good thing. Continued high stress-producing activity is directly associated with varied debilitating maladies. By productively managing conflict we lessen the dire effects from overstress.

Conflict Point No. 25
Back Off

Q: The stress of conflict can be exhausting. Any suggestions?

A: During intense discussions we can become so intellectually and emotionally depleted that our performance suffers. By temporarily withdrawing, relaxing, and taking a detached view a cooler, clearer perspective can emerge. Perhaps we can then resume the discussion bolstered with renewed vigor and a fresh perspective. Backing off is not backing away; a withdrawal is not a retreat. Better to regroup than to re-grope.

Conflict Point No. 26
Pick Your Battles

Q: Should we ever resist becoming involved in conflict situations?

A: Any decision to resolve an interpersonal conflict requires an investment of time, energy, talent, and quite possibly, other resources as well. While time is always a finite commodity, energy and talent are finite qualities for most of us. Carefully picking our "battles," therefore, is crucial. Rising to every cause, issue, concern, problem, or opportunity diminishes time, depletes energy, and dilutes talent. The choice, admittedly a difficult one, is uniquely ours.

Conflict Point No. 27
Intervene Cautiously

Q: When two staff members are locked in controversy, should I intervene?

A: The administrator needs to consider the duration, severity, and intensity of the observed difficulty. Fortunately, when disputants are provided ample time in a hands-off environment, most conflicts are amicably resolved.

An intervention is appropriate whenever (1) the issue is unduly prolonged, (2) other staff members enter the fray and take sides, or (3) the performance of either disputant is adversely affected. The last factor is a critical one requiring immediate attention. Warning: proceed cautiously. Those in conflict are "experts" — they're familiar with the issue, its causes, and its emotional fallout.

Conflict Point No. 28

Listen First, Then Confer

Q: How does one intervene in a dispute between two staff members?

A: Recall that previous caution about intervention without insight. Disputants are well-versed adversaries. Talk separately to each. Listen carefully to individual perceptions, probing gently for possible hidden agendas. Then, share your observations with each, again *separately*. This procedure allows two options: the disputants can meet together and attempt a resolution, or you can join them as observer, mediator, or adjudicator depending upon the complexity, severity, and intensity of the dispute.

Conflict Point No. 29

Spend Time Now, Save It Later

Q: That last suggestion is time consuming. Why confer individually a second time with each disputant?

A: Additional time invested now could save even more time later if an unchecked interpersonal conflict spreads. Intervention tends to isolate the dilemma and guarantees, minimally, an opportunity for resolution. Admittedly, we're pleased whenever disputants effect a workable compromise without our physical presence. We've not only saved time, but more important, we've also elevated the maturity level of those involved.

Conflict Point No. 30

Seek Respect, Not Love

Q: What can a leader do to restore harmony between two staff members who dislike one another?

A: Perhaps we can answer this question by asking three more:

- Does the dispute spill over into classroom settings or among other staff?
- Are the disputants performing their work in an acceptable manner?
- Is it important for all adults working in a school setting to "like" one another?

Assuming the answer to the first question is "No," the second is "Yes," and to the third is "I don't know," we're ready for a fourth question: "What's the problem?" When professionals respect each other's work, acknowledge personal differences, and perform to expectations, it matters not if they personally dislike one another.

Conflict Point No. 31
Discard Old Tapes

Q: How can I improve the quality of interactions with a colleague who persists in replaying old tapes?

A: The judicious use of an "I message" might cause your colleague to discard lingering issues: "When you persist in reviewing our previous difficulties, I become anxious because it deprives us of an opportunity to resolve current issues." Or, a more forceful message might work: "That was then, but now is now — we both need to invest our limited time together inventing our future, not replaying our past."

Conflict Point No. 32
Put First Things First

Q: Does one ever protect a staff member even if such protection is not in the best interests of the school?

A: If we're talking about protecting an individual's civil rights, yes. If it's a disruptive interpersonal problem, whatever is best for the educational program must prevail. Our job is to provide the very best instruction for those learners entrusted to our care. If replacing one or more staff members serves that purpose, then it must be so. Failure to act decisively is professionally irresponsible. A school is never more important than those served by it; a school is always more important than those who provide the service.

Conflict Point No. 33
Cool Off the Call-Ins

Q: I can manage internal conflicts. It's that occasional frenzied outsider who rains on my parade. Any suggestions?

A: First, let's engage the enraged phone caller. Delay any meeting with those suffering emotional overload. The simmering period can cool the complainer and possibly cancel an encounter. If the unraveled caller only wants the phone contact and is not verbally abusive, listen patiently and attentively for any verifiable data. Sometimes, action taken based upon an insight gleaned from a hostile call can prevent similar protests. If a callback is promised, seek an agreed upon time for it. And, however difficult, thank the caller.

Conflict Point No. 34

Wait Out the Walk-Ins

Q: Suppose that "frenzied outsider" is *physically* present. Any suggestions?

A: This may be the most controversial response to your questions. Principals employ diverse methods for dealing with a hostile intruder. They assertively pursue whatever tactic seems to work. Generally, we seek a quiet space and allow our visitor to vent. One tactic, following such a tirade, is to ask, unemotionally, "Are you finished?" Although you've probably activated Round 2, keep repeating the three-word probe until you elicit an exasperated or exhausted, "Yes." Then, calmly thank the distraught visitor and add appropriate comments. However difficult it is to keep one's cool while another is losing theirs, cool usually prevails over hot.

Conflict Point No. 35
Time It Right

Q: How does one know when to execute a plan for conflict resolution?

A: One veteran principal insists that timing — knowing when to execute an appropriate strategy — is the most important skill in conflict management. We agree since any ill-timed use of a well-conceived plan is counterproductive. The "appropriate" time usually falls between a cooled-down period of reduced tension, and a cooled-off period of lingering resentment. Knowing *when* to apply "what" is a mix of experience, intuition, and luck.

Conflict Point No. 36
Talk It Out

Q: Isn't it easier to settle conflicts with written messages?

A: Easier isn't better. Face-to-face encounters usually offer the best opportunity for conflict resolution. The full message is "lost" when one is unable to see and interact with the other person. Thus, the absence of dialog frequently causes one-way, written messages to be misinterpreted. While phone exchanges do allow for dialog, they totally mask those non-verbal cues so helpful in productive exchanges. Save the written messages for summarizing agreements reached during face-to-face encounters.

Conflict Point No. 37
Anticipate Crises

Q: These suggestions help in resolving routine matters. What about crisis situations?

A: Admittedly, each of us has "managed by crisis" — applying instant solutions to unexpected, potentially volatile events. Lacking clairvoyance, therefore, we anticipate emergencies by designing contingency plans. Obviously, in quieter times we replace urgency with eloquence. Rational and deliberate solutions tend to be more appropriate, more acceptable, and more permanent. The message is clear: prepare for crises *before* they occur.

Conflict Point No. 38
Delegate Selectively

Q: Can you delegate the responsibility for resolving conflict?

A: While many issues can be resolved by staff members, we must delegate selectively. An interpersonal rift between principal and teacher, for example, is usually not foisted upon an uninvolved assistant. Attempts by third-party interveners to heal strained interpersonal relationships seldom succeed. If we are the key players in the conflict arena, then we are primarily responsible for its resolution. Once we fully accept the notion of conflict-as-opportunity, ownership and resolution of an issue become welcome challenges.

Conflict Point No. 39
Fragment the Issue

Q: What about singling out dissidents and using one-on-one tactics?

A: "Divide-and-conquer" approaches abet win-lose outcomes. Initial fragmenting of the *issue* could suggest a more promising strategy. A demand by teachers to equalize compensation for all extracurricular assignments, for example, is probably triggered by diverse motives. By carefully separating out the "equal-pay-for-equal-work," the "no-extra-pay-with-reduced-load," and "no-duty-assignments-whatsoever," the "it's-already-part-of-everyone's-load," and the "more-pay-for everything" positions, a clearer picture of the issue emerges. When strong, varied positions persist, it's difficult to identify a prevailing one. In this illustration knowing who is for what and why is an initial step toward a workable compromise.

Conflict Point No. 40

Visualize Successful Outcomes

Q: Do visualization techniques help in resolving conflicts?

A: Many leaders report success in conflict situations by mentally rehearsing their planned actions prior to an actual encounter. Once enough data are gathered and a strategy selected, one quietly "visualizes" how the encounter will begin, how it is likely to progress, what adversarial responses are predictable, and, most important, how the encounter is successfully terminated. That's right — *successfully*. While whether or not one can actually "program" oneself for success is debatable, entering a conflict situation with an action plan *and* a positive mental set certainly enhances the possibility.

Conflict Point No. 41

Generate Additional Conflict

Q: Does creating *additional* conflict ever resolve an issue?

A: A few administrators deliberately exacerbate certain situations by "overloading circuits" — adding pressure through face-to-face encounters, provocative memos, collegial pressure — then, by unexpectedly easing the tension, lull a disputant into believing a compromise is forthcoming, thereby gaining a brief advantage. This technique works if both parties are now willing to settle their differences in a constructive manner. Such "creative manipulation," however, backfires when the additional pressures irrevocably polarize the positions.

Conflict Point No. 42
Trust the Group

Q: Don't we rely too heavily upon collaboration in managing conflict?

A: In stressing the advantages of collaborative efforts — exploring new approaches, exacting commitment, extracting long-term agreements — we've not cited any shortcomings. Admittedly, settling disputes via administrative fiat is quick. However, defining a problem, discussing options, and deciding upon a course of action are time-consuming. Whenever we engage in mutual and meaningful problem solving, time intervals expand. And the process usually won't move any faster than the participants allow it to. More often than not slower is better.

Conflict Point No. 43
Continue as You Are

Q: I administer a quiet, apparently conflict-free school. Am I doing something *wrong?*

A: To the contrary. Assuming that you're neither ignoring nor suppressing interpersonal diversity, you're "doing something" *right!* As noted, conflict is an ever-present force in all group endeavors. You and your staff may have reached a level of maturity and expertise that allow potentially disruptive situations to be productively handled. Identifying conflicts early, even in a pre-skirmish stage, and taking appropriate action before open warfare erupts is one hallmark of an effective organization.

Conflict Point No. 44

Emphasize the Benefits

Q: Why do people often express a sense of loss following a compromise?

A: When conflicts are constructively resolved and workable compromises forged, adversaries occasionally perceive that they "lost" something in the process. While the very nature of compromise suggests a yielding of positions, it is important that we emphasize the benefits accruing from such interaction. This "agree-to-agree" nature of compromise can offset any lingering notion of loss. How leaders convey this statement of benefits affects not only the acceptance of the current compromise but also the willingness to generate new ones.

Conflict Point No. 45
Monitor Agreements

Q: How do you ensure that all agreements are followed?

A: Once disputants agree on a course of action, provisions for ensuring compliance are often needed. The key question is, "How will we know that we've resolved our differences?" Adding a monitoring component during the initial agreement stage reinforces the commitment for compliance. In its simplest form a planned, periodic "talking-it-over" minimally ensures that the former disputants are keeping the conversation going.

Conflict Point No. 46
Know Thyself

Q: Is there any special trait needed to become skillful in managing conflict?

A: Those skills enabling leaders to excel generally also prevail, specifically, in conflict situations. Perhaps the Socratic dictum, "Know thyself," best characterizes successful managers of conflict. They quickly recognize those behaviors that trigger defensiveness, anger, evasiveness, resentment, and other counterproductive reactions. They also know how to control, counter, and channel these emotions productively. Being aware, then, is the key. Awareness allows us to make choices, and an appropriate choice can profoundly influence an outcome.

Conflict Point No. 47
Be Resourceful

Q: What happens when all the tactics and stratagems have been exhausted, and there's no resolution in sight?

A: Depending upon situational variables, we could: (1) begin formal procedures leading to mediation or arbitration; (2) refer a disputant to an employee assistance program; (3) start termination proceedings; (4) design new tactics; (5) seek a new position; or (6) live with the problem. We change only what we can within the bounds of our energy, talent, and vision. Rarely is that light at the end of a tunnel an oncoming freight train.

Conflict Point No. 48
Summarize It

Q: Let's get this straight. You're suggesting that conflict is a normal, ever-present energizing force essential for interpersonal and organizational growth? That conflict, rather than a factor to be suppressed, denied, or avoided represents an opportunity for creative expression? That when managed appropriately and objectively, conflict can yield positive outcomes benefiting both internal and external publics?

A: Yes, yes, and yes.